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ABSTRACT

Discussed in the monograph are procedures and conclusions of Dr. Catherine Garvey's research on the social speech of 48 preschool children. It is explained that each S was observed and videotaped while in a playroom with two other children. Findings are cited for the following areas of study (with sample conclusions in parentheses): social mechanisms and communicative competence (number of words per utterance increased with S's age, and one child's number of utterances was affected by the partner's utterances); requests for action and responses (varied forms were used according to circumstances); play with language and social play (all word play was original, and in all cases the social play quickly became a joint production); and pretend play (this type of play followed well organized patterns reflecting the concerns of the children). A summary presents the study's major finding, that young children are highly skilled in social behavior and are capable of widely varied interaction and communication. (CL)

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National Institute of Mental Health

Children's Play and Social Speech

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FOREWORD

Because the mental health of children is one of its highest priorities, the National Institute of Mental Health is supporting a wide range of basic and applied research in this area. This monograph describes the long-term and highly significant research program of Dr. Catherine Garvey and her coworkers at The Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Garvey is making detailed observations and analyses of the social speech of preschool children. There have been many studies of psychosocial development in young children, but few have focused on children's speech in spontaneous play and on the ways in which children develop communicative competence. Until recently it was thought that the speech of young children is essentially egocentric, but Dr. Garvey has now demonstrated that even young children use speech to interact with one another. These social exchanges seem to be vital to the development of cognitive abilities.

With the acquisition of knowledge concerning communicative competence and how it develops, it should be possible to recognize developmental failure and then devise preventive and rehabilitative measures. Moreover, the data on temporal relations in dyadic speech have particular significance to the field of mental health for it is known that controlled timing of verbal and kinesic techniques is important in both mother-child relationships and in the interactions of adults.

Psychiatrists, psychologists, psycholinguists, pediatricians, teachers, and—perhaps most important—parents will learn much from the information in this monograph. It will attune them to the subtle and complex nuances of the social behavior of little children and to the need to be sensitively aware of this behavior.

Bertram S. Brown, M.D.
Director
National Institute of Mental Health

Children's Play and Social Speech

Human beings are social animals. Dr. Catherine J. Garvey has been studying the play and other interactions of pairs of preschool children at special laboratories in the Department of Psychology at The Johns Hopkins University to learn to what extent little children are social creatures and how early social skills in speech develop. "We've been able to confirm recent work that indicates that the ability to perceive and adapt to another person's verbal and nonverbal behavior develops quite early. Piaget found that egocentric speech, monologing, babbling, and the rest took up about 40 percent of the child's time. We've been concentrating on what goes on during the other 60 percent," says Dr. Garvey.

Recent research suggests that children can be considered social beings essentially from birth. The mother talks and coos to her baby at an early age. The child soon learns to respond, to interact. When infants smile—or parents think they do—they get immediate response and reinforcement; after that the smile takes on special meaning both for parent and child and brings special rewards. This is a very early social interaction.

But the most important social interchange—communication—starts with speech and with conversation. Speech itself is essentially a social act, taking place in a social context. True enough, much of what passes for speech, with adults as with children, may simply be mutual monologing—simultaneous, as is common with children at play, or alternating, as at a cocktail party. But conversation should involve an

exchange of information or attitude, either direct or implied, in one form or another—request and response, query and answer, direction and acknowledgment; it should display the cooperative involvement and progress of a game, like two basketball players working the ball toward the basket.

Little Children at Play

It may well be that a major function of early language is purely social—a means of establishing and maintaining interpersonal contact in which information exchange is secondary, and much is implied rather than stated. This might be particularly true of speech in play. Analysis of the speech of very young children—particularly at play—should lead to better understanding of the dimensions of the child's social development and social world. It can provide knowledge that someday may be used to evaluate different childhood experiences as they relate to interpersonal behavior. This knowledge will be valuable, for example, in assessing the effects of early childhood experience in day-care centers and play schools. The research is carefully examining the ways in which children—even very young children—learn from one another, thus providing information that should be useful in many educational settings. Another ultimate benefit is that, by studying the normal development of social speech, it may be possible to detect early failures and abnormalities in the growth of interpersonal behavior and, as a next step, to find ways of preventing or ameliorating such failures.

For a long time, parents, teachers, students, and psychologists have been watching children, in natural settings and under more controlled conditions, and have found them cute, noisy, or troubled with various problems of learning, behavior, or adjustment. But few—or none—have analyzed the patterns and components of speech and the interchanges to determine what social events and phenomena were taking place. Linguists have studied the development of the language capacity as reflected in children's speech, but that is not the same thing, for both linguists and psychologists have viewed language development as an individual rather than as a social or interpersonal phenomenon.

In years past, Dr. Garvey worked intensively on the structure of language, such as grammar and phonology. But then her interest turned toward more pragmatic areas, including investigation of semantic structures and particularly what has been called "communicative competence." She notes, "As children begin to talk, it is evident that they have learned a great deal more than syntax, phonology, and that sort of thing. They have also learned a number of rules for using language in interpersonal transactions."

One linguistic construct, the "speech act," proved especially attractive because it seemed to promise to relate functional and formal aspects of language, linking social intent to linguistic means. One child, for instance, wants something from another—action, cooperation, or information—and produces a form of request that requires a response. In practice this may sound simple and relatively uncomplicated, but request and response involve fairly sophisticated mutual adjustments, communications, and understandings.

So do other speech acts, says Dr. Garvey.

> It is a common tradition, for instance, that much of speech is not chitchat, or a discussion of something apart, but is actually a social act itself. When someone says, "I congratulate you" or "I promise you," he's not simply making conversation or being polite—he's also doing something, performing a social act. Saying becomes doing.
>
> And all other things we say have act characteristics of some kind. "Close the door" is a request for action. An action must be taken in response. Even a "What?" is a request for information that requires an action or response. So when these children talk together, or communicate in play, they are performing a series of social acts.

What may sound like purely linguistic and technical analysis of elements and patterns of conversation may, therefore, tell us a good deal about the social development of even very young children.

A study by Dr. Garvey and Dr. Robert Hogan has shown that pairs of children of preschool age can and do produce mutually responsive speech, well beyond simple exchanges. Further work by Dr. Garvey suggests that as early as age 3 children have already worked out, in the way they make requests or respond to them, well-advanced social-cognitive patterns or schemata that systematically use conventional language and vocabulary. Language is not only a means for, but an important aspect of, social interaction.

The evidence accumulated by Dr. Garvey and her colleagues clearly shows that little children, for all their real and reputed egocentricity, actively seek interaction and learn to conform to the roles required of them and to the demands and expectations of others. Early conversation—especially role-playing conversation—becomes a basis for social contact. It reveals the beginnings of the conventions of mutual understanding that underlie all social discourse. Through early interpersonal experience and conversation the child becomes, and can be shown to become, a practicing social being.

The nursery school child prattling away in the sandbox with a playmate in a game of "pretend" is actually involved in a subtle and complicated give-and-take which includes mutually understood rules, implied goals to be achieved together, shifting tactics, the exchange of information and definitions, and the like.

For "speech acts" to achieve results, certain conditions or circumstances or understandings must be in effect and followed; otherwise the acts cannot come off. Philosophers call these "happiness" or "felicity" conditions.

One rule or condition, for instance, is that the questioners really want to know the information they are asking for. They must also seriously believe that the listener has or can get that information and will be willing to divulge it. If the questioner does not believe these things, yet asks the questions anyhow, the questions are not sincere, and neither is the questioner—like the pitcher who clowns on the mound and tosses the ball haphazardly. He is not playing the game, and he will not get good results or cooperation.

Children as young as 3 understand these rules very well, without explicitly being taught them by any adult. (In fact, most adults themselves cannot formulate these rules.) Children continually check and correct lapses in the accepted procedures of exchange, and monitor one another. In pretend or ritual play they will modify rules, make up definitions, and set up parameters of the situation as they go along—but, until formally changed, these conditions are nevertheless binding. The conditions can undergo steady refinement to assure that the play remains authentic according to the basic premises. For instance, in one session a boy acting the role of a father asked his pretend son if he would like some coffee. The "son" immediately corrected him: "No, I'm the little boy. . . . I'll have some milk." Play is serious business. Don't fool around.

The Observation Room

All the children in Dr. Garvey's studies were of preschool or nursery school age. All were middle class—many the children of professionals. All were brought to the laboratory by teachers (children brought by mothers appear to be more reluctant to cooperate). All were eventually placed, in pairs with changing partners, in playrooms filled with toys—always the same toys—where they could be watched and monitored through one-way mirrors and heard through microphones, and their actions and words were recorded on video tape. They could see the microphones, and some even played with them, shouting into them; but they did not see the adults and acted and interacted spontaneously, caught up in their games and interchanges.

In all, 48 children were observed. Three children of about the same age and from the same nursery school came together to the laboratories. In each group of three—or triad—there were either one boy and two girls or two boys and one girl. The youngest group included 12 children ranging in age from

2 years, 10 months to 3 years, 3 months. The oldest group included 24 children who were 4 years, 7 months to 5 years, 7 months. An intermediate group of 12 children ranged from 3 years, 6 months to 4 years, 4 months. On arriving at the laboratory each triad drew straws—one long, two short.

For about 15 minutes the "long straw" played alone and talked with an adult while the two "short straws" were led into the playroom. They found pictures and posters on the walls, a sofa, microphones hanging from the ceiling, and an interesting assortment of toys: large stuffed animals, toy telephones, oven and dishes, a wooden car big enough for two, ironing board, blocks, toy cars and trucks, a miniature tool belt, funny hats and dressup clothes, and an unusual three-legged stool with a magnifying glass in the center.

Before the children drew their straws, they were taken to the drinking fountain and the toilet, accompanied by a researcher and a teacher. Most of the children chatted, but not with one another. Rather, it was the usual child-teacher or child-adult talk—"Johnny had a birthday today"—and so on. Later in the observation room, however, they talked freely with their partners. In fact, some of the children described as shy and quiet by their teachers spoke and acted up as much as the others.

Although under observation the children ostensibly were left alone—no visible adults—a few gave some indications that they might have known, from shadows on the one-way glass or from the microphones, that some adults were near. If a child seemed worried at being separated from the teacher or if the teacher who observed the session judged that a request to go to the bathroom was sincere, the session might be interrupted. But generally the children did not act as though they knew they were being watched, or perhaps they didn't care.

After each 15-minute period, the children in each triad were shuffled so that each yielded three pairs, and every child interacted with two others. This provided at least one dyad of mixed sexes in each triad, as well as different partners. If interaction is truly a form of social behavior, then a child will act differently with different playmates, even in the same room with the same toys and props. The differences will be important because they will reflect a child's particular social skills, adjustments to the needs and actions of specific others, and therefore social maturity.

Social Mechanisms and Communicative Competence

What devices do children actually use and what competencies do they exhibit in social speech? How do they actually express thoughts, feelings, or intentions, give information, or

influence another child to do their bidding? Before they can achieve social goals, they must be able to request, promise, or deny, with some assurance that they are understood and that they may get what they want.

Before they can even speak, they have learned to perform some social gestures and actions that have some of the effects of speech and that apparently help the development of language. Without words, they can still attract the attention of another child or of a parent; they can then offer or show them something. As children begin to learn to talk, these gestures can acquire verbal markers, as when they point to something and define or name it—"duck" or "man." Such gestures and actions, named or not, are social acts. When the child achieves greater language ease and fluency, these acts can become conventionalized speech acts.

The cause and effect relationships between the development of social speech and external stimuli are hard to follow. In any case, children soon learn to do things with words that they may have done earlier without words. And words, of course, allow them to do and say things that they could not have done before at all. By 3 years of age normal children have certain well-advanced social-cognitive patterns of speech that allow them to conduct effective interchanges and often to achieve fairly complex social goals such as bargaining or persuading. In Dr. Garvey's laboratory, the majority of sessions revealed linguistic resources that could and did show successful social behavior.

As children get older—as shown by the older groups tested—speech acts and mechanisms apparently increase in complexity, skill, and effectiveness. Horizons expand. Not only can children express desires or feelings, but they can develop alternative verbal forms and strategies. For instance, when a little boy wants cake, he does not merely point to it and say "cake," as he might have in the early days of speech. He can alter tactics as his feelings or the situation require. He can ask: "Will you give me some cake?" or demand: "Give me some cake!" or express his wishes directly: "I want some cake."

A step farther, he learns to work out complicated strategies to get what he wants. In the following conversation between two 4-year-olds, B was sitting on a large toy car, and A wanted it. Eventually, although B did not at first want to give it up, A got it.

A: Pretend this was my car.
B: No!
A: Pretend this was *our* car.
B: All right.
A: Can I drive *your* car?
B: Yes, okay.

B then smiled and moved away from the car, and A climbed on and made driving noises.

In measuring the effects of age, sex, and partner on children's dyadic speech, Dr. Garvey (with Mohamed Ben-Debba) found that the number of words per utterance increases with age. This finding is in agreement with other studies—and indeed with everyday observations—which used length of utterance as a measure of increasing social and linguistic competence with developing maturity. More unexpectedly, however, they also found that the number of utterances produced by one child was influenced by the number of utterances of the partner, an influence which also increased with age. Such an adjustment, or synchrony, probably reflects social adaptation; and the improvement with age should logically reflect increased competence in communication as well as improvement in social skills. Sex of the partner apparently makes no significant difference in number of utterances—at this stage.

In egocentric speech, children can start or stop at any time, or say anything, with no regard for the partner. But social speech must involve some kind of sequential give-and-take, a more or less orderly progression of reciprocal and mutually adaptive gestures, something like the verbal equivalent of a formal dance, with even greater variations.

Request and Response

There are many social gestures by which one person can attempt to influence another and to evoke a change in the other's behavior—suggestions, invitations, prohibitions, and requests for permission or for action. Perhaps the most common is the request for action. Also, it has advantages for detailed study: It illustrates how the conversational game is played. A successful request must elicit an observable response from the person addressed. This may not be true of other gestures, such as a promise. More significantly, the request may bring on an important sequence of acts and events that have social meaning. The desires of one person can only be met—or countered—through the active cooperation or the active resistance of another.

Request and response involve a game that is played by defined and mutually understood rules. They imply rationality and morality—what is right and wrong, what is proper and improper, what is consistent and fitting and what is not. In practice they must involve a whole series of give-and-take negotiations based on rules and guidelines: offerings, challenges, counteroffers, and so on. Even among young children, long and coherent conversations and joint enterprises are built on requests for action or requests for permission.

The premises behind a sincere request are simple:

1. A wants B to do something.
2. A believes that B can do it.
3. A believes that B is, or might be, willing to do it.
4. But A believes that B would not do it of his own volition. To get B to do it, the request has to be made. Therefore A makes it.

Children not only understand all these premises, but catch one another up if there is a violation of the rules and conditions, as Dr. Garvey and her colleagues often observed. It is generally true of social behavior that the violation of a rule provides information on the tacit foundations of that rule.

It seems remarkable that children of 3, or even younger, can spontaneously carry out such an apparently complicated business. Perhaps this ability has not been noticed as often on the playground or in the home because children isolated in pairs, away from adults and the distractions of groups of other children, are not very common. And when adults do overhear them, they seldom get the full significance of the interchanges. True enough—children are cute, they mispronounce words, and some might even lisp; therefore what they are doing must be simple and "childish."

The force with which requests are presented can be indicated by the language and the linguistic devices used:

- The direct requests are most forceful. They demand a compliant response. They often assume that the responder has little choice but to do what is asked or told—and immediately. They are usually in the form of an imperative: "Open that door!"
- Indirect requests are not demands. They tend to mitigate the force behind the request, often appealing to an external necessity or to one of the conditions of the interchange: "Do you mind opening the door?" or "Could you open the door?"
- First cousin to the indirect request is the inferred request, which does not actually state that the requestee should do something but makes the implication clear: "I need a pencil." A variation, common in play, is the "pretend" strategy: "Pretend that toy was mine." (To this the other child said, "Okay . . . But he's really mine.")

Adults are more adept than children at both the indirect request and the inferred request, and they are also more devious: "Wouldn't it be nice if that door were open?" "Why is that door closed?" "My, it's hot in here."

The great majority of requests from all children observed were direct and for the most part they were acknowledged verbally. Twice as many indirect requests, though they remained a minority, were used by the older children, perhaps reflecting greater facility with language.

The children knew what they were saying, and they consciously used strategies. They varied the forms of their requests according to circumstances. Although "polite" forms were rare in conversations, in role playing a pretend mother or wife tended to use phrases such as "Would you like to come over?" or "Could you mind the baby?" to an imaginary friend on the telephone. Even more varied were acknowledgments and the degrees of compliance or refusal. These responses were often based on the "premises" listed above, e.g., "I can't" or "No, I don't want to." The children varied tactics and speech according to partners, showing that they could interpret and evaluate what their partners were saying and what they meant—thus indicating a high level of social competence.

The "contingent query," a specialized variant of the request for information, is worth particular note. In it the "catcher," in effect, throws the ball back to the pitcher and tells him to throw it again—only better this time. He needs more information. Perhaps he simply wants an utterance repeated because he did not get it clearly the first time. In that case he asks "What?" with a rising inflection.

If he did hear the utterance and did understand it, he acknowledges it; but he may want more details or want a part of the message to be more specific. Again he asks "What?" But this time the inflection is falling.

A: I have something of yours.
B: What? (Rising inflection, meaning "Repeat that.")
A: I've got something of yours.
B: What? (Falling inflection, meaning "Be more specific.")
A: Your teddy bear.

The contingent query is a major mechanism of control in conversation. It regulates and maintains the flow of talk. The initiative goes back to the first speaker; the response is not complete, but the interchange is put more nearly on the track and the next move and who should make it are clear. The query acknowledges the preceding utterance, even indicates receptivity—but does not commit the responder to any action, at least without conditions. It is a part, even if a small part, of what the preschool child needs to function well in conversation. But it is not egocentric speech at all; it is a distinct, and in its own way skillful, social act embedded in the conversation.

Adults use the contingent query frequently in speaking to young children; it is, in fact, a powerful method of teaching and leading the child. The adult asks for more information, asks for better information, asks the child to express it better. Usually the adult repeats the request, like a nondirective therapist:

Child : I don't have that color of a beanbag doll
Adult: You don't? (Rising inflection.)
Child : No, not that color.
Adult: What color? (Falling inflection: "Be more specific.")
Child : A different color.
Adult: What different color? ("More specific still.")

By the time that speech is fluent—about 3 years of age—the child has already pretty well learned the use of the contingent query and its implications. It is not learned as part of syntax or the language code, but as part of learning to talk to another . . . then to listen . . . then to talk . . . and so on and on.

Play

Dr. Garvey's findings confirm that to preschool children, play is not relaxation from the serious business of life. It *is* part of the serious business of life. The children are trying on adult roles they will later act—or play—and exploring them. They are learning about things and about relationships. They are sharpening their language skills and social skills. Play includes many things, and with children the transition between play and "real" life is easily made, with children moving back and forth rapidly and without serious dissonance. From reality, to adjustment, then back to the business of the game:

A: Pretend there's a monster coming, OK? Monster gonna come. OK?...
B: No. Let's don't pretend that.
A: OK, why?
(Pause)
B: Cause it's too scary, that's why!
A: Oh, I don't think so. Let's pretend where there's nice monsters.

Play is flexible. It is not any single behavior, but it includes many behaviors and a unique opportunity to study them. It often clearly contrasts with "reality," and yet appears to have its own rules and internal consistency. It includes many kinds of interactions, with rules peculiar to each. It includes ritual play, boisterous activity, and pretend play. Yet reality underlies and underlines it and is so interwoven with it that, for example, the teacher, familiar as she was with the children, was often hard put as she watched through the glass to judge such simple things as whether a child really

had to go to the bathroom or was only pretending. The children themselves often checked with the playmate to find out if something was said or done in play or "for real":

(A, a boy, sits down on the stool with the circular glass in the seat.)
A: I have to tinkle. I have to go to the bathroom.
B: Do you really?
A: Pretend. I got to sit down. I'm tired.

When children are alone they often play; and for the purposes of Dr. Garvey's research the play had to be spontaneous. That means that it had to be free of the strictures and visible presence of adults. Spontaneous play gives the observer of social development an added advantage because it tends to decrease all restraints imposed by external reality. In play the children can "wing it"—impose their own criteria, make up their own situations, create or adapt their own realities. These creations and alterations must be done together; there are continuous, finely tuned pressures to adjust to the responses and viewpoints of others. Greater give-and-take occurs than would be possible in a situation imposed from without or defined by adults.

Familiarity has a lot to do with behavior. The children in the experiments were from the same nursery school and knew one another. Compatibility is also important; since each child played with both children from the triad, differences in compatibility and in behavior—particularly idiosyncratic behavior—could be easily spotted. Most important, since the themes on topics of play were changing and had to be defined and redefined, the children had to signal to their partners how they expected their verbal or silent gestures to be understood. These signals showed what was important to the play state and defined the level and terms of interaction.

"Social," of course, does not necessarily mean "agreeable." The children argued often; but mutual interpretation and adaptation can take place as much between children disputing who is going to get the green phone as in a pleasant chat about favorite TV programs. The behavior of the pairs had to be measured along the social dimension, because the children could communicate for a while, then go into monologing or silence. Children seldom feel the adult constraints to do things they do not want to do because of duty or politeness; and when they play, or quit play, it is generally because they want to.

The degree of play could be measured in large part by the degree of literalness. Play often differs from nonplay activity as a metaphorical usage may differ from its literal meaning. But the real difference between play and nonplay is in style rather than in content—how the children treat the

material played with rather than the nature of the material. The same material can often be treated either literally or as "pretend," and the difference simply depends on how the children consider it at the time. Often the children themselves were not sure whether the words were to be taken literally or not.

One child lifted a flowerpot, while playing house, and said with emphasis: "I'm going to take this home." The other looked at him dubiously: "Home? Really?"

If a child wanted to stop play altogether, he only needed to switch from the figurative to the literal:

A: Hello, elephant.
B: I'm not elephant. I'm Joey.

And that ended it.

A primary condition of play therefore is that children must somehow agree on what is to be taken "straight" and what is not. With children, as with adults, one literal remark can cause an entire imaginary or metaphorical edifice to crumble and fall.

The two dimensions on which the behavior of the children was judged in each session—social and literal—provided four interaction states:

1. The children are neither playing nor being social. In fact, they are not interacting at all and when either speaks, it is in monolog.
2. The children are playing, but not socializing. Each is playing alone.
3. The children are talking to one another, but not playing. They are holding, in fact, what amounts to a serious conversation.

Here is an example. One child was seated at the car, the other on a chair:

A: If I grow up my voice will change and when you grow up your voice will change. My mom told me. Did your mommy tell you?
B: No. Your mommy's wrong. My voice, I don't, I don't want it to change. Oh, well.
A: Oh, well, we'll stay little, right?

Social interchange need not involve play to show imagination or a lively interest.

4. The fourth state is the one with which we are primarily concerned: The children are playing together.

There is a fifth possible state—one in which one child is playing alone, and the other is doing nothing, or perhaps watching. But experience has shown that this state is not very common, nor does it last long. The idle child will usually

take a cue from the other, or give advice, or propose a joint activity.

Generally, the play observed through the one-way mirror started spontaneously; and its form and many of the themes were determined by the possibilities of the material available. The play was not conventionalized (in other words, the children did not engage in organized games), and there was no prior planning or suggestions by adults, so the products can be said to be truly creative:

A: Do you know what? That green telephone is the kind of policeman uh um they have in their car.
B: One, two, three. (dialing the telephone)
A: What are you, a policeman?
B: I'm a fireman and a police. . . .

What the children did bring into the room were the basic skills needed to mesh one's behavior with the behavior of another.

Although we all are sure we know what play is—and intuitive understanding may be as good as any other—it is not easy to define precisely. In summary, it is more a matter of style or attitude than of content. It is motivated by a desire for fun, rather than any practical end. It is often quite energetic or may appear to be conducted quite soberly. It may be social or not, and it involves a distortion of reality, so that it can often be measured by the degree of literalness with which the content or topic of play is handled.

Children need no training to be able to distinguish between play and nonplay and often lay down definitions for what is and what is not:

A: But everyone gets two turns in here 'cause I only had one, right, so you'll be in here with David [a play child].
B: You can be the husband. I can be the wife.

The reason for this kind of marking is clear: You must know what your partner intends or what rules he or she will abide by in order to know how to act yourself. Redefinition, adaptation, and cooperation are continuous:

A: Can I ride on it now?
B: You get in back while I get up front, OK?
A: Hey, you be the engine and I'll be all the horses. OK? . . .

All play must have structure. But it is not really a confining structure. It allows for the generation of novel and creative behavior. Unsupervised play of two children provides a much better means for the study of social competence than any externally imposed test or formal information exchange.

Play With Language

Children not only use language in play, but they play with language itself, using it as the resource for play, manipulating the words, playing with sounds or concepts.

At its simplest level, play can be made with the sounds themselves, even with children too young to speak clearly. It can be used for sound effects—motor noises, animal noises. It can be used as a rhythmic accompaniment to motions, for example, clicks and hums. Or sounds can provide a play activity—in rhythmic chanting of nonsense syllables.

The vowel easiest for the baby is the *ah* sound, and the consonants most natural to him are "m" and "p"--a fact that has caused endless delight to parents who found that their infants, before they could say anything else, could produce the words "mama" and "papa." Sometimes they kept on repeating an almost endless series of mamas or papas with little encouragement.

From such repetitions, and from the squeaks, bellows, hums that accompany motor activity, the child can move to repetitive strings of syllables, then to nonsense syllables, then to syllables that have normal linguistic form and apparently some meaning, although not always meaningful to the listener. One researcher reported a nursery school child chanting as he finished building a project with his blocks:

Now it's done un un
Done un un un un.

By the time children are 3 years old, they usually have considerable command of the language they need. The form of play with words that then is most distinctive is "ritual play," which consists mostly of ritualized repetitions and rhythms, with variations on the common themes. In the following, A and B were both girls. They saw the microphone, recognized it as an instrument to speak into, and each in turn ran to it, shouted her message (each using the same rhythm and intonation), then ran back to the sofa while the other either repeated or tried to go one better:

A: Hey, hello, I'm Rachel Booboo.
B: Hi, hello, I'm Rachel Booboo.
A: Hi, hello, my name is Rachel Parrot. Your turn. [There is a toy parrot.]
B: Hello, my name is Rachel Parrot.
A: Hello, my . . . hello, my name is Mr. Donkey.
B: Hello, my name is Mr. Elephant!
And so on.

By the ages of the children in Dr. Garvey's studies, ritualized noises, singing, chanting, and speech rhythms had

taken over. The children liked to repeat the sounds that were descriptive—that sounded like the noises made, or were onomatopoeic: "ding-ling" for the telephone, "ruff-ruff" for the barking dog.

Often solitary repetition, like a singsong chant, can provide a vocal accompaniment to an ongoing activity. Sometimes, in fact, it can become something apart from, and more important than, the original speech or activity. A child started to play with the dune-buggy, repeated the words over and over, became absorbed with the sounds, tried variations on them until they became "June-buggy," kept it up, and finally walked away from the toy itself, but not from the repetition. In Gertrude Stein's famous poem, a girl named Rose repeats "A rose is a rose is a rose . . ." in similar fascination with the intonations and subtle changing meanings of the name-word. One girl walked around the laboratory room repeating "yesterday" with as many varied inflections and emphases as [though she were] a Beatle. The fascination for these children was on the sound and sound-meaning properties of the words, rather than their literal meanings.

Social Play

But the primary interest both of the children and experimenters was not in sounds but in the social use of language in play.

Children play with language socially in a number of ways. They play spontaneously with the words themselves and with rhyming; they play with fantasy and nonsense; and they play with the standard conventions of conversation. In each case they change, distort, and make fun of the norms, the accepted forms, and the literal meanings.

In all cases of social play observed by Dr. Garvey and her colleagues, though one child might start first, the play very quickly became a joint production. None of the word play was copied from some previously learned nursery rhyme or song. All contained originality.

The most obvious type of word play uses rhyme. Parents and authorities often notice how easily children's speech falls into rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and the other devices of poetry. (It is also interesting to note how often slang and hip street jargon—and not only in the United States—do the same thing.) However, good rhyme does require some skill and maturity. The children observed came up with only a few simple rhymes. The youngest to rhyme was 45 months old. The youngest group (34–39 months old) did not rhyme at all.

Typical of a jointly created poem is:

I need this.
You need that.
You go way up high.
You go way up high.
You go high in the sky.

And more of the same. Ritual and rhyme were both being used.

Fantasy and nonsense have always been popular with children and have sold a lot of children's books. (Beware the jabberwock, my son.) Topsy-turvy meanings particularly appealed to the preschool children. What proved most popular were proper names that were odd or impossible ("My name is Rachel Booboo"), or meaningless nouns. Interestingly, this popularity was true only for nouns or their modifiers. Verbs were neither created nor distorted.

The children liked nonsense syllables and terms with scatological or insulting overtones, even though sometimes they applied them to themselves.

For instance, child A wrote a letter while B listened, drumming:

A: Dear Uncle Poop, I would like you to give me a roasted meatball and some chickenpox . . . and some tools.
Signed, Mrs. Fingernail.
(She smiles and looks expectantly at partner.)
B: Toop poop. (Laughs) Hey, are you Mrs. Fingernail?
A: Yes, I'm Mrs. Fingernail.
B: Poop, Mrs. Fingernail.

Other forms of play also violate expected contexts or conventions. Outright falsehoods became a source of much verbal play:

A: Which one would you rather be with?
B: Um. I think . . . um . . . Lisa, because she's a boy. (Giggles)

But when the children were not playing, getting the name and sex correctly assigned became important and serious business, and they went to some trouble to see that it was done properly.

A: Hey, Karen.
B: My name is Kiren. My mother calls me Kiren.

The violation of truth and reality in play can work only if both partners are thoroughly aware of what truth and reality are or could be as contrasted with their definition in a mutually accepted pretend state. Each must also know that the other is aware of what the truth is and that both of them know they are playing. If these conditions are not met, a false statement will be interpreted as a mistake or a lie.

Each utterance has the potential of being a social act. Each can be play or nonplay, depending on the style and the

cues. For example, a child can make a play threat, and the partner may not be certain whether it is play or real—and respond either way. The balance is delicate, and misunderstandings often arise.

Play threat:

A: I'm going to throw something at you. Want me to throw this? It won't hurt.
B: Right. I know 'cause it's nice and furry, right?
A: Yeah. (throws stuffed animal)
B: That didn't hurt.

Real threat:

A: (Hits at partner)
B: I'm telling. When I get home to my mommy, I'm gonna tell.
A: I gonna hurt you.
B: Hm . . . stop it. I don't want to tell. Stop that, all right? [Crying] Will you please stop that?

In the following instances, play requests for information violated the basic conditions that the speaker does not know the information, and really wants the answer. This speaker obviously knew the answer, but wanted to play a questioning game. Play was more important than the information.

A: What is this?
B: Hat.
A: Funny. And what is this?
B: Dress.
A: Yuck. And what is this?
B: Tie.
A: All yucky stuff.

If the elements of speech can be played with, so can the conventions of conversation and interactions themselves. One basic tenet of conversation is that it should get somewhere, that some progress should be made. Also, in normal conversation the answer to an assertion or question is seldom a flat "no"; a negative response is usually expanded upon or elaborated upon. But the children liked to toy with this convention also, repeating assertion and answer in singsong repetition, without any explanation or elaboration:

A: That's your cowboy hat when you go outside.
B: No, no, it's not.
A: I bet it is.
B: No it's not.
A: Yes it is.

Such nonprogressive exchanges could continue even further.

Ritual Play

The most obvious form of play, which both children and observers found easy to identify, was ritual play—a very com-

mon and persuasive form. Ritual interactions consist of repetitive, rhythmic exchanges which are clearly play, and can, in time, seem to have an almost hypnotic effect.

A: Hi, bubba.
B: Hi, mommy.
A: Hi, bubba.
B: Hi, mommy.

This kind of exchange could keep on almost indefinitely building up its own momentum, until fatigue finally sets in. There are often variations within the exchanges, but they must be consistent with the mutually agreed upon patterns and themes:

A: Hello, my name is Mr. Donkey.
B: Hello, my name is Mr. Elephant.
A: Hello, my name is Mr. Tiger.
B: Hello, my name is Mr. Lion.

Some ritual play, obviously, involves elements of one-up-manship.

Ritual play has many advantages, both as play and as interchange. It is "pure" in its playfulness, with little apparent connection to the world outside; yet it doesn't require the explanation and preparation that some other forms do. It saves a great deal in cognitive effort—the children don't have to work at thinking of what to say next, nor do they have to lay down as many rules for procedure. It has natural rhythm and tends to take on a singsong tempo. It can be sustained as long as the children want; and if, later, they tire, they need only change the pattern or theme slightly and go right on.

A: I'll be the dragon and you be St. George that killed him.
(B shoots. A falls down.)
B: Now I'll be the dragon. (A shoots.) Do it again, I'm not dead.
(A shoots again, and B falls very dead.)

At the end of a long play session, the children often did tire or become bored and lapsed into a literal discussion or searched for a new activity. But after a break they frequently took off again on a new tack.

All age groups created ritual play in both simple and complex forms. The older dyads used the complex forms more often, as might be expected.

Children cannot really conduct a play episode unless they know the difference between what is play and what is not. No matter how far afield their roles and rituals took them, the children were always in contact with literal reality. At any time the participants could stop the action, like a movie, to settle a point, clarify a rule, or discuss a procedure ("Say

'Hi, Mommy' "), then start again with the change incorporated.

Play is a delicate state which takes work to keep going. It must be supported and given structure by definitions and guidelines. Responses often have to be discussed and interpreted to see if they are appropriate to the state of play. ("Do you really?" "Pretend.") The stage must be set and the roles assigned. ("I'll be the mommy and you be the daddy, OK?") When play is over the curtain is often rung down with finality. ("I'm not playing any more.")

Consistency, both to the roles and the premises, must be maintained. When a 3-year-old boy playing the father started to fix dinner, the girl told him firmly "Daddies don't cook." One boy told a girl to take a holster off because "Girls don't wear things like that." If playing adults, children reproduce what they take to be appropriate adult behavior. In several mixed pairs the girls expressed fear of a large stuffed snake that everyone knew very well was a toy. In each case the boy reassured the girl and fearlessly slew the reptile. Rarely did a girl depart from her expected role and take a few whacks herself when with a boy. If her playmate was another girl, however, she could and often did subdue the snake.

Dr. Garvey's research shows that the children were doing more than having fun. They were experimenting with life.

The essence of any social exchange is shared experience. But play is more than that. It has a creative dimension, a cooperative effort to sustain a theme and develop it along lines that do not violate the premises and conditions. Imagination must also be shared, and the imaginations work together to build the edifice. For instance, one child announces that they are going to sit down to dinner. The second specifies relationship: They are father and son. The first child accepts that, contributes to it by calling the second "kid," and they go on to make the toy dune-buggy big enough to bear them so that they can go to the store to get the milk that is needed, and so on.

Pretend

Creation of an altered, controlled world is most clearly accomplished in the ephemeral form called "pretend" play. By Dr. Garvey's definition, "pretend" must involve some transformation of the here-and-now. Many things, objects as well as ideas, are not supposed to be what they seem; and they may change more during the course of play. The pretender is king and fairy godmother; he or she can change the identities of persons, the functions, natures of things, and even attitudes and emotions.

Jean Piaget postulates, and most other authorities agree, that the representational period, during which the child is capable of symbolizing, begins during the second year of life. Pretend play, which uses the symbolic ability, begins soon after.

Infants try to handle objects in ways that could be predicted from their physical and perceptual qualities—they are hard, they are heavy, they can be put into the mouth, and so on. Gradually they learn to relate objects to processes and functions—they have wheels and can be rolled, they make marks and can be used for drawing. Finally, they can symbolize and transform the objects in their minds or their play to fit in with their concepts. They may even invent objects for pretend play as they need them, leaving the literal world farther and farther behind.

Pretend play appears to be more satisfying if a companion is part of the pretense, giving it dimension and solidity, changing it according to his or her perceptions, making it richer.

There are at least five types of communication that indicate that a state of pretend has been or will be in effect:

1. Negation—the means, often abrupt, by which the state is broken or terminated.

A: "I steaied your cake."
B: "I don't care. It's not a cake any more."

2. Enactment—the gestures, tone, statements, or attitudes that the actor puts forth to establish or support the pretend situation or character: cry like a baby, speak sternly like a parent, make noises like a motor.
3. Signals—these support pretense by tipping off the partner and urging him to go along with the play. They include winking, grinning, giggling.
4. The preparatory gestures set the stage, supply terms and conditions, and get the ball rolling at the beginning of pretense: "That green telephone is the kind that policemen have in their car." "Do you want to play with me?"
5. The final technique is one that involves explicit mention of transformations in or out of the pretend situation, or defining the terms or roles. "I'm a work lady at work." "Pretend you hated baby fish." "This is the train" (while pointing at the sofa).

A lot of conversation is devoted to creating, clarifying, maintaining or negotiating pretense. An edifice is being constantly created and modified, and both partners must understand what is going on at all times. The social interchange must therefore be continuous and precise. The verbs "got to,"

"have to," "supposed to" are repeated again and again: "I gotta go get some milk and roast beef." "You're supposed to be at your home."

Children seldom rehearse pretend play, or lay out the exact plot in advance. Still, pretend play follows remarkably well-organized paths that reflect the concerns of the children. These paths or patterns of play are called schemas.

One popular schema was "Making a Call"—in it the children used toy phones to call persons or organizations. "Treat/Heal" was also popular, with a lunchbox being used for a doctor's bag and the patient either a stuffed animal or the playmate.

"Averting Threat/Danger" is a particularly interesting and common schema. It illustrates the children's ability to dramatize and create variations on a single theme—that of potential danger and response to it. The schema specifies a threat (often the snake) and a potential victim (usually one of the children). There is also, of course, a defender, who generally uses some sort of weapon or instrument to annihilate the threat. This schema was more elaborately worked out by the older children, who more frequently managed to defeat or stand off the threat. Their strategies and the pretend play itself were often quite complex. Sometimes they called in help—a policeman or a magical animal.

The youngest children could pretend fear effectively and convincingly, but could not do as much about it. More of them fell victim. They seldom counterattacked, seldom thought to call up (pretend) reinforcements, and often simply fled rather than inventing a defense. They were, in effect, less resourceful than the more experienced 4- and 5-year-olds.

* * * * *

In summary, all social play requires discrimination between play and not play, the ability to abstract the organizing rules or principles from their play expression and to keep them consistent, and the ability to identify a theme and contribute cooperatively to its development. But what explains why children play and get such satisfaction out of it? Of course, it is fun; but what precisely is fun, and why does it give pleasure? Play may relieve tension by ridiculing, or challenging, or imitating the accepted and "proper" behavior and artifacts of the literal and adult world. But why should that be satisfying?

Dr. Garvey's work, along with accumulating evidence from other sources, indicates that children, like adults, derive satisfaction from exercising their abilities to control their

own environments as well as the behavior of others. In non-play life they have even less control over their destinies than adults do. Some adults have the ability and power to hold off or defeat the circumstances and forces that limit them; pre-school children do not, cannot.

But in play—particularly ritual play—children can set the rules and create or rearrange the circumstances ("Hey, you be the engine and I'll be all the horses, OK?") with relative freedom. Further, the satisfaction is mutual. The actors do not simply try to manipulate one another; they work cooperatively toward a possible mutually reinforcing, mutually gratifying conclusion. It is an everybody-win game, or it can be; and it is all theirs, created by them. Not even adults can match that in real life. In play, in fact, adults are weaker than children; they are inhibited by grownup "realism" and the taboos about acting as they feel—"like children."

Dr. Garvey is primarily a linguist who has worked in the areas of sociolinguistics and social psychology. She and her colleagues were able to apply insights and techniques from these areas to problems which are usually considered the preserves of educational and developmental psychologists. They were also, therefore, able to add new analytical dimensions to the study of the social development of young children and to document their conclusions in a way that had almost never been used before for the study of children's social development.

Their analyses of the elements of linguistic and social interchange and competence are painstaking, detailed, and often technical. But they are also conclusive: Children as young as 3 are already highly skilled in social behavior, capable of extensive and diversified communication and social interaction.

They have already learned not only how to adjust to and work with one another in sophisticated and creative ways, but they have also learned a good deal of how the world fits together. Says Dr. Garvey: "What we see going together in play are not just wagons and horses, tea cups and saucers, a spoon and feeding, but attitudes with sex-typing, typical desires and behaviors with age and sex distinctions, steps in action or event sequences."

Why should this "maturity" of social behavior and communicative competence in young children come as a surprise to anyone? Partly, the persuasive influence of more traditional theories of socialization concentrated on the initial egocentricity of infants and the egocentric components of the actions and speech of older children. But surprise at the extent of children's social skills might also result partly from the fact

that children are different from adults—therefore it is easy to assume that they are as much unskilled as they are younger. Besides, they *are* cute—an attribute that can always distract attention from the significance and complexity of what they are doing and saying.

It is also important to note that our knowledge of the patterns and regularities underlying the immense variability and flexibility of adult social behavior and particularly conversational interaction is relatively slight. As further progress is made in the study of discourse and other forms of social interaction, this knowledge can be applied to the study of development. One of the contributions of Dr. Garvey's work is the application of recently developed research approaches from the areas of sociolinguistics, communication, sociology, and the philosophy of language to the study of the young child's acquisition of communicative competence.

Children learn a great deal from play. So did the observers in Dr. Garvey's laboratory. The richness of the world in which children live and of the worlds they create has been consistently underestimated. Dr. Garvey's work is an important contribution to the growing body of evidence that human children are indeed complex, subtle, social human beings.

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